DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 172 913 **PS 010 658**

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TITLE Studying Children's Language Through Role-Play.
PUB DATE Mar 79
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development (San Francisco, California, March 15-18, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Children; *Communicative Competence (Languages); Dramatic Play; *Language Development; Language Research; Linguistic Competence; *Models; *Pragmatics; *Pretend Play; Psychological Studies; *Research Methodology; Role Playing
IDENTIFIERS *Naturalistic Studies

ABSTRACT

This introduction to, and comment upon, a symposium on communicative competence argues that the appropriate unit of analysis in language development is communicative competence and proposes that the development of communicative competence can be studied usefully through observing children's communication during role play. Communicative competence is distinguished from linguistic competence by the former's emphasis upon the context of discourse and the judgments involved in making speech appropriate to context. Role play is suggested as a source of data because it is a natural activity for children, yet it involves them in situations which do not arise in their real lives (e.g., acting as doctors or parents) and is therefore a setting in which the extent of their knowledge of language use can be assessed. Some problems with this approach are noted briefly. Principles which have been established in other areas of developmental research, e.g., children's tendency to abstract the invariant features in a situation, are recommended as starting points for the proposed research program. The potential utility of this program for other areas of research is suggested and questions are raised about the function of role play in child development. (BH)

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Studying Children's Language Through Role-Play

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Based on an introduction and discussion presented at the Symposium on "Communicative competence: Language use and role-play," SRCD, March 1979.

Introduction

It's hardly conventional to have the discussant talk first, before the papers to be discussed! However, I am dividing my time as discussant, to provide first an introduction to the session and then comments at the end. The reason for the introduction is based on my own personal reactions at meetings. I often go to sessions dealing with topics that I'm not working on currently as a way of finding out what is going on. (There's a wonderful line in one of the Beatles' movies about "getting an early clue to the new direction.") But sometimes I come away disappointed, because although the people "up here" all know why they are talking about what they are talking about, the time limits inherent in conference presentations almost preclude giving sufficient background sections in their papers for the less knowledgable members of the audience to see the significance of the work. Symposia should be better in this respect than paper sessions, because after all they were organized around a topic, but all too often I find that the topic is merely a collective presupposition in the minds of the speakers. That presupposition is, of course (being a presupposition), not transmitted to the audience--it is assumed that they share the information. Sometimes all the audience shares with the speakers is knowing what the title of the symposium is! Therefore, with the goal of better communication in mind, I am providing introductory comments that some of you will find quite familiar, but which

will, I hope, make each of the papers to follow more meaningful for other people here.

The topic we are dealing with, "Communicative competence: Language use and role-play," emerges from the intersection of two fields that are themselves relatively young: The study of communicative competence and the study of play. I'll spend a few minutes on communicative competence, and then give some of the reasons that studying language use in the context of play seems fruitful to us.

The term communicative competence[1] is generally used today when one wants to suggest that the abilities being studied go beyond the traditional realms of developmental phonology, syntax, and semantics. Part of communication is choosing the utterance that is appropriate in the context. Utterances must fit the surrounding discourse context (for example, a question requires an answer). They must be relevant to the topic already established, or signal in some way that a topic change is being introduced. Utterances vary according to characteristics of the listener (for example, how much the listener knows, and his or her status and sex). They also must be appropriate for the situation, with some situations requiring more formal speech than others. In order to speak appropriately and be an effective communicator, the child needs to learn various rules, skills and conventions. Language is not just a system for generating grammatical sentences, but a system for the communication of ideas and feelings among speakers.

I said a moment ago that the study of communicative competence is a young field, but actually some investigators have paid attention to variations in the form of speech as a function of its context for some time. My first exposure to rules of sociolinguistic variation was in a course I took from Susan Ervin-Tripp in the early 60's. She talked about greetings and terminations, about shifting speech styles to fit the formality of the situation,

about modifying requests to be more or less polite to fit the status of the listener, and so on. I found it exciting to become aware of all of these subtle variations in linguistic behavior that we all control, yet never think about. These aspects of language were especially meaningful because I had just returned from a year as a student in Germany. Long after I had accepted the fact that my pronunciation and syntax were going to remain non-native (and often even comical), the sociolinguistic aspects of acquiring a second language remained troublesome. It's not as easy to accept being socially inept as it is to accept sounding like an American, but there it was, day after day--trying to figure out who to address as "Sie" and who could safely be called "du," clumsily starting conversations in situations where Germans would have remained politely silent, suffering the trauma of having to use the telephone. Now, as you probably know, the acquisition of "communicative competence" as well as the ability to construct grammatical sentences is very much in in second language teaching, but all I had then was vague feelings of having "broken the rules," not being able to imagine what sort of rules.

Sociolinguistic variables were brought into the study of child language in the Field Manual written at Berkeley.[2] It suggested that researchers studying language development gather information on topics such as "the relation of language development to socialization," "the acquisition of usage patterns," "natural conversation," and "speech acts." However, it seems fair to say that such considerations have become part of the mainstream of language development only recently. Why was there such a lag between the time that some researchers recognized that language involves more than saying grammatical sentences and the time that communicative competence became the popular concept that it is today?

Throughout much of the 60's, the major thrust of research was finding counterevidence against a "learning theory" or "empiricist" model of language development. In that view, the child gradually built up a set of "linguistic responses" by imitating adults and being reinforced for successively closer approximations to the adult language.[3] Demonstrations that there were novel, productive structural patterns in child speech,[4] different from those in the adult language, provided powerful evidence against a learning theory approach, and for many years attention was focused almost exclusively on the learning of morphology and syntax. Though phenomena such as stylistic variation or greeting rituals might have been viewed as interesting in themselves, to proponents of a theory of language acquisition that stressed innate knowledge[5] they were seen as peripheral to the central issues in language acquisition.

At one level, the growth in interest in communicative competence might just reflect a broadening of the focus of research. After all, there are an awful lot of people studying how children learn how to talk. So some of us can do grammar, some phonology, some speech styles, and so on. But I don't think that that is the entire explanation. Rather, I believe that the current interest in the broader aspects of communicative abilities reflects a fundamental shift in the types of models being considered to explain language acquisition. This shift is away from views that are either strongly empiricist or strongly nativist, toward a model that attempts to study language acquisition in the context of its communicative function. To briefly characterize this view that has been emerging in recent years, we might call it a constructive interactional model. I, and I assume most of my colleagues, believe that the child brings a great deal to the task of learning a language. There are strong predispositions for the abstraction of regularities, changes in cognitive abilities with maturation and non-linguistic experience, and evolutionarily

based specializations for speech and language. But we are equally as convinced that the social, affective and linguistic environment of the child typically is supportive of the learning of language. The pattern of normal acquisition, therefore, reflects both the nature of the child and the nature of the social interactional setting in which language is used.

The question of language learning, taken broadly, is how the child comes to choose linguistic forms that are appropriate. Appropriate for the semantic content to be expressed, for the surrounding discourse context, for the listener, and for the situation. Learning how to choose the appropriate directive form in order to get your listener to cooperate is just as basic a question as learning how to choose the correct auxiliary verb.

In the papers that will be presented here, the investigators have attempted to get information about children's ability to choose linguistic forms that are appropriate for various speakers, topics, and situations. The method of getting samples of the child's abilities in each case involves some sort of role-playing. Since we are suggesting that role-play is a good way to learn about language use, let me suggest some of its advantages. First, although the real-life speech of the child requires modifications for various topics, listeners, and situations, the possibility of seeing the child's linguistic and social knowledge is increased enormously by observing the child in role-playing.[6] In pretending, the child is sometimes the mother or father as well as the child, the teacher as well as the learner, the doctor as well as the patient. Situations arise that would be rare or impossible in real life, and we can discover what the child knows about behavior in those situations.

Secondly, though there are differences in how much the investigators speaking today have structured the role-playing situation, it is important to note that role-play is a naturally occurring behavior for children in our

society. That is, there is no need to train the child to do the task. Rather, children spontaneously spend much of their time in role-play from an early age. I am often troubled that so many of our conclusions about children's abilities are based on their performance in strange situations that psychologists devise for them (what we call experiments). Certainly, both observational and experimental methods are needed for a full understanding of behavior, but I think that developmental psychology has suffered from too much of a adult-centric approach to the child. When we watch children play, we allow them to show us what they know in their own way. As C. Garvey (1977) and others have pointed out, play provides a unique window into the child's world.

Discussion of the papers

Two themes can be discerned in the papers presented in this symposium: descriptions of language use and a consideration of the effects of the methods used for observing children on the data obtained. Andersen discussed several aspects of register variation that young children could use when taking on roles such as mother, father and baby or doctor, nurse and patient. O'Connor, Strage and Ervin-Tripp were looking for reflections of children's knowledge that indirect speech, or "hints," can function as requests. Mitchell-Kernan described young black speakers' ability to switch between two speech codes, Standard English and Black English, to reflect differences in the roles they portrayed. From these studies, we can begin to build up a picture of what kinds of communicative skills children have at various ages.

The O'Connor, Strage and Ervin-Tripp paper addressed the issue of the effect of the methodology on assessing children's abilities. Both Andersen and Mitchell-Kernan used a technique of data collection in which the child is given considerable freedom of response. Mitchell-Kernan recorded spon-

taneous role-play and Andersen recorded controlled improvizations. With these techniques, generally large amounts of data must be analyzed because there is no way to guarantee that the behavior of interest will appear at any particular time. The investigator observes and hopes to discover regularities in the child's linguistic usage. However, if one has a specific question in mind (e.g., do children at such and such an age have a particular ability?), it is reasonable to try to set up situations to elicit evidence about the ability. O'Connor, Strage, and Ervin-Tripp provided a highly structured context in order to find out whether children comprehended hints as requests. However, they discovered in analyzing their data that 1) the problems generally found in testing comprehension (necessity of eliminating contextual cues for responding) interfered with the interpretation of their results, and 2) the freedom given the children by using role-play as a method may also have obscured developmental differences. The question raised in their study is an interesting one and it would seem that other methods may provide further information--for example, use of a more constrained comprehension task or eliciting children's judgments of appropriateness of speech. The problems they encountered using role-play should make other researchers aware of some of the limitations of the method for drawing conclusions about children's real-life abilities.

Beyond description--some suggestions for principles

As we move beyond description and categorization of behavior in this young area of investigation, we might give some thought to the directions that the work will take us. I would like to spend a little time speculating about some of those directions, but first I want to return to the term that we have been using to cover the abilities being studied: "communicative competence."

I noted in the introduction that the term "communicative competence" is used to suggest that one is studying aspects of language broader than syntax, semantics and phonology. Sometimes this means that the writer distinguishes between linguistic competence, which includes those areas, and communicative competence, which looks at other aspects of communicative ability such as pragmatics, discourse features and sociolinguistic variation. In my view, it would be better if we used the term "communicative competence" to refer to all aspects of communicative ability, with subareas defined loosely as phonological, syntactic, semantic, discourse, register variation, and so on, keeping in mind that the boundaries among those areas are not at all neat. The child is learning how to talk, not how to produce sounds or order words in sentences or get listeners to cooperate. This usage of the term communicative competence would reflect the way it was used in the Berkely Field Manual that I mentioned earlier. I am concerned about the possibility of fragmentation within the field, with people engaged in studies of syntax paying no attention to what's going on in the study of discourse phenomena, and vice versa. As fields grow, there is generally some inevitable fragmentation, in that we just can't expect to keep up with everything that everyone is doing, but my concern stems from that fact that I think we have learned some important things about language acquisition in the last twenty years, and I would like to see new areas, as they emerge, built on that foundation rather than ignore it.

Specifically, in looking at the acquisition of appropriate usage, I think we might look for some principles that have been found to affect development in other areas.

1) Abstraction of invariant features. The child will have a powerful drive to infer regularities from the behavioral evidence that is presented to him. We have seen examples of this phenomenon today--the child's contacts with individuals in a particular role have been varied, but the child pulls out general characteristics. For example, in learning to sound like a doctor, the child is not exactly imitating any particular set of utterances that a doctor once used, but abstracting certain invariant features from a wide experience.

2) Order of development. We hope that we will be able to predict the order of features that will be abstracted by the child. For example, it appears that features closer to the acoustic perceptions will come in before features that reflect content, and content will be accurately role-played before the child has picked up syntactic regularities in the role. Even later, repair phenomena suggest metalinguistic awareness. This ordering fits in with what we know about other areas of acquisition. E.g., even pre-linguistic infants show in their response to language and their babbling that intonation and voice characteristics have been noticed. In contrast, metalinguistic awareness of various other aspects of language is late to develop.

3. Overregularization. As the child perceives regularities, we would expect overregularization. Examples from the learning of morphology, syntax and semantics are readily available. The child applies regular past endings to words that he has never heard in that form--baby comed and I doed it. SVO order dominates in early syntactic acquisition in English, leading to errors such as the misunderstanding of passive sentences. Similarly, it is not surprising to find that children at certain stages of development use highly stereotyped registers in representing roles. The regularity that has

been abstracted for a time overrides the irregularity intrinsic to real life. We have seen examples of this in the studies presented today. Also, many of you may have been struck, as I have, at the way young children's role-play reflects the broad stereotypes to be found in the culture rather than reflecting the actual experiences of the child's everyday life. It seems as if the child goes for "the big picture" in discovering regularities. Thus, a little girl whose only personal experience with doctors has been with a female pediatrician may still act out the doctor role with a "male" voice. I think that such stereotyping of roles is directly analogous to the patterns we find in other aspects of the study of language. An interesting question is to see what determines these stereotypes (the child's peer group contacts, the media?) The existence of these stereotypes might suggest some caution in use of "play-therapy": it was always thought that child reflected his or her own experiences, acting out what has been seen in the family.

4. Production limitations. We may also expect that there will be limitations on how frequently and consistently a child will reveal a behavior pattern that is in the process of being mastered. Inherent in development seems to be various sorts of limitations on the child's attentional and processing capacities. These limitations are not yet well understood, but at all levels of language learning and other learning, we find gradual emergence of skills over time and a long period in which the skills are easily interfered with. A term that's sometimes used to capture this aspect of learning is "automatization." Role-play is interesting when viewed with this concept in mind. Traditionally, we were taught that young children couldn't role-play. One of the thrusts of recent work has been to show that they can. But actually what we have shown is that they can sometimes, under

some circumstances. The role-playing of young children is fragmented, and the gradually increasing ability to behave in ways not restricted to the way things are in "real life" should have implications for our understanding of the child's cognitive development as well as linguistic and social development.

5. Strategies for optimal communication. We would expect that in the face of limited knowledge and limited processing capacities, there would be strategies that aid communication and social interaction. For example, we would expect contextual support, in the form of objects relating to the roles, to facilitate role play. If the child is playing with an adult rather than another child, the consistency in the adults' linguistic context should also support the child's behavior. Over time, play should become increasingly less dependent on real world constraints, leading to more complex themes, more fantastic object transformations, and, in terms of the issue of primary interest here, more accurate and effective role enactment.

Implications for other areas

Thus far I have suggested ways in which this new area may benefit from previous work in child language. Can we in turn offer something to researchers who are looking at syntax, semantics, or phonology? I hope so. Our eventual goal might be a production model for communicative interaction. In such a model, social intent would be a high level decision that would then affect later choices of vocabulary, structure, and sound. In acquisition, the learning of forms is surely embedded in the framework of social intent. It seems reasonable that our understanding of the way the child learns the forms will be enriched to the extent that we see how those forms map onto intentions from the child's point of view. For example, recent work on adult-child conversations shows that features of discourse may be involved in the child's

learning of syntactic patterns. In Ervin-Tripp's keynote address to the Child Language Research Forum in 1977, titled "From conversation to syntax," she argued that "the analysis of discourse is not a distraction from the study of the development of syntax." In other words, individuals interested in the broader issues of communicative competence are not ignoring the important problems that motivated developmental psycholinguists in the '60s, but rather feel that they offer a new approach to solving some of those problems. Ervin-Tripp suggested that the child might use particular "production rules" first in limited contexts before these become generalized and give rise to syntactic patterns. I have been studying the acquisition of reference to past events in parent-child discourse, and argue that syntactic rules for the expression of past have their origin in quite concrete discourse phenomena.[7] Other recent detailed studies of adult-child interaction make similar points.[8] Thus it may well be that studying various aspects of communication competence will lead us not only into observing phenomena that were not attended to earlier, but may also provide a fuller explanation of development in the more traditional areas of language acquisition.

Furthermore, I hope that work on communicative competence will be of interest to psychologists who are working in areas other than language development. In particular, this work is relevant to the study of social development--I will go so far as to say I think that language analyses will provide a powerful tool for researchers in that area. Over the years, attention has focused on finer and finer details of children's non-linguistic behavior, but use of the content and style of the child's speech to assess awareness of appropriate social behavior is just beginning. To give a concrete example from one of the papers today, Andersen has suggested that her children seemed to believe that lower pitch was appropriate for higher status

individuals. If we knew that a particular child marked status in this way (from prior observation) then we could make inferences about the child's perception of other characters by noting whether higher or lower pitch was used. In my work on role-playing (Sachs and Devin, 1976), I found that asking children to talk like babies or caregivers gave us a picture of what they perceived as characteristics appropriate to those roles--for example, that babies are dependent and caregivers are nurturant. These perceptions were reflected in some obvious ways, but also in some rather subtle ways (for instance that requests in the role of babies referred to their own needs while the requests in the role of caregivers were frequently probes about the state of the baby). Similarly, Mitchell-Kernan's data revealed information about children's perceptions of black and white adults that might not be revealed by other means of assessing attitudes. As we better understand the ways in which we express social intent in our speech, the study of speech variation will become increasingly useful to those interested in social development.

The function of role-play for development

Once we have a clearer picture of the patterns of development of linguistic usage and the principles underlying it, we can turn our attention to a very difficult issue: determining the function of role-playing for language and social development. Thus far, we have been using the fact that children role-play as a convenient way of getting information about their knowledge of language and social appropriateness, but it also may be that experience in role-playing provides children an opportunity to learn to use language more effectively and interact more effectively in social settings. The child may learn, first from adult co-players, and then from other children, how we carry out various roles and how the use of language affects the play partner. I

said that this is a difficult issue because it's tempting to assume that any behavior pattern observed has a function. However, just because role-play is a pervasive part of childhood experience in our culture does not show that it plays a necessary or important role in language learning or socialization. Studies are clearly needed in which the effects of differential amounts and types of role-playing might be observed.

Summary

In conclusion, we feel that the study of role-playing may provide a useful method for learning more about the child's development of appropriate linguistic usage and appropriate social behavior. The studies presented today suggest some of the characteristics that can be described and illustrate some of the methods that can be used in this potentially rich area of research.

Footnotes

1. The term "communicative competence" was first used in print, it seems, by Dell Hymes in 1967. Hymes adopted the term in order to contrast broader aspects of language use with the term "linguistic competence" that had been popularized by Chomsky (1965).
2. The Field Manual for Cross-Linguistic Study of the Acquisition of Communicative Competence (2nd draft, 1967) was edited by D. Slobin, and contained sections written by S. Ervin-Tripp, J. J. Gumperz, D. Slobin, J. Brukman, K. Kernan, C. Mitchell, and B. Stross.
3. For examples of this viewpoint, see Mowrer (1954) or Skinner (1957).
4. Some early examples can be found in Ervin and Miller (1963), Braine (1963) and Brown and Fraser (1963).
5. See Chomsky (1965), McNeill (1966).
6. Some studies that have already looked at various aspects of language use in role-playing are Andersen (1977), Garvey and Berndt (1977) and Sachs and Devin (1976).
7. Sachs, 1978.
8. /E.g.,/ Schieffelin, 1979.

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